

Enhancing Biodiversity-Friendly Farming Practices in Europe

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Introduction

Biodiversity loss within agricultural landscapes in the EU has accelerated due to agricultural intensification and landscape homogenisation. Farmers play a crucial role in biodiversity management, as their decisions shape the composition, the intensity of use and consequently the ecological health of the environments they manage. A recent examination of the external and internal factors influencing farmers' willingness to adopt biodiversity-friendly farming measures (BFFM) showcases farmers' attitudes and identifies barriers and drivers across different European regions.

Policy Context

The European Union (EU) has been promoting biodiversity conservation through initiatives within the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and the European Green Deal (e.g. the farm-to-fork strategy, the biodiversity strategy, the nature restoration law). These policies emphasise sustainable agriculture and biodiversity conservation as key pillars of the EU's environmental goals. Despite these efforts, empirical evidence highlights an uneven and often insufficient uptake of biodiversity-friendly practices by farmers due to varying socio-cultural, socio-economic and regulatory contexts across Europe. Against the background of the severe and ongoing biodiversity loss in the EU, there is an urgent need to refine policy instruments to better reflect local conditions and farmers' preferences and to guarantee broader and long-term uptake of measures.

Major research findings

1

Factors influencing farmers' behavior

Farmers' adoption of biodiversity-enhancing measures is influenced by a complex interplay of external and internal factors. External factors include market dynamics, social pressures, regulatory and incentive frameworks and stakeholder influence and involvement, while internal factors involve personal values, attitudes towards nature, knowledge and experience, and perceived benefits of biodiversity conservation^{1, 2, 3}

2

Farmers' perception of biodiversity

Research from ten European countries demonstrates that farmers' understanding of biodiversity can significantly influence their farm management decisions. Those who recognise the intrinsic value of biodiversity are more likely to implement holistic conservation practices, while those focused on instrumental values derived from expected ecosystem services provided by biodiversity limit their actions to narrow, short-term measures²

3

Farmers' perception of stakeholders

As regards the role of stakeholders in farmers' biodiversity decisions, research in 10 countries shows that farmers hold very diverse perspectives on government bodies, NGOs, advisors and input suppliers, but also on their peers and on society as a whole. There is a gap between how stakeholders are perceived in terms of general characteristics such as trustworthiness, reliability, understanding and support for farming, and their biodiversity-related behavior, which was evaluated significantly more negatively. The outcomes indicate potential for improving policy development through the involvement of trusted agricultural and non-agricultural stakeholders across the entire agri-food value chain and beyond governmental bodies in biodiversity-friendly farming initiatives³



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Research from UK, the Netherlands, Romania and Estonia indicates that the farmers' perceptions of the costs of implementing biodiversity measures go far beyond financial aspects. Elicited viewpoints show that farmers are strongly impacted by perceived governance-related uncertainty, the perception of unproductiveness, lack of support, administrative burden, underpayment or social non-conformity. The findings emphasise the high heterogeneity of farmers' needs when implementing biodiversity measure within and across different European regions (Scherfranz et al., 2024b).

Policy recommendations

Aside of, and in addition to already existing effective programs and regulations, some recommendations for further development can be made.

1 Tailored incentive programs

Policies should allow for flexibility to adapt to regional and local contexts, reflecting farmers' perceptions as well as their social, cultural, economic and natural environment. Providing long-term stability in biodiversity management contracts, guaranteeing adequate financial public and market support and reducing bureaucratic burdens could encourage wider adoption of BFFM. Incentive programs should consider approaches beyond sole action-based management contracts, such as co-designed contracts, result-based payments, collective administration or implementation, or value-chain contracts. Such contracts might overcome perceptions of unproductiveness, social unconformity or lack of support. However, the building up of new incentive programs requires long-term stability of political frameworks, as well as a careful design in terms of practicability but also the effectiveness of environmental outcomes. Negative experiences might otherwise lead to frustration and mistrust, both having the potential of causing strongly negative effects on future implementation.

2 Enhanced stakeholder involvement

Effective biodiversity conservation requires the support of more active collaboration between farmers and a range of trusted stakeholders beyond the government, including agricultural advisors, researchers and environmental NGOs. Encouraging communication between these actors and investing in trust-building with different stakeholder groups can improve both the development and ultimately the implementation of biodiversity-related policies for farming. Therefore, it is to be recommended to further strengthen high-quality stakeholder involvement in the development of agricultural policies and agri-environmental programs.

3 Promotion of holistic biodiversity views and knowledge on biodiversity cause- effect-chains

Encouraging a broader understanding of biodiversity's intrinsic value beyond the instrumental value, and enhancing farmers' knowledge of the cause effect chains between management, biodiversity and the benefits resulting from it could drive long-term, sustainable changes at the landscape level. Regionally embedded information campaigns and advisory services tailored to farmers and including community-based approaches could emphasise long term ecological benefits of biodiversity and encourage management practices with strong positive effects on biodiversity while being compatible with existing farm management.

References

This policy recommendation is based on the following research articles:

¹ Klebl et al. (2024a): Farmers' Behavioral Determinants of On-Farm Biodiversity Management in Europe: A Systematic Review. *Agriculture and Human Values* 41(2), 831–861. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10460-023-10505-8>

² Klebl et al. (2024b): How Values and Perceptions Shape Farmers' Biodiversity Management: Insights from Ten European Countries. *Biological Conservation* 291, 110496. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.biocon.2024.110496>

³ Scherfranz et al. (2024a): Using a Perception Matrix to Elicit Farmers' Perceptions Towards Stakeholders in the Context of Biodiversity-Friendly Farming. *Journal of Rural Studies* 108, 103282. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2024.103282>

⁴ Scherfranz et al. (2024b): Farmers perceived financial and non-financial costs of their biodiversity measures. SSRN. Preprint https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4849505